

From Canton to Canton

1855 letter via Calcutta to Canton, China

By Lee Scamp & Andrew Cheung



Introduction

In the "Gems in my collection" column featuring in the November 2007 Hong Kong Philatelic Society newsletter, a member showed the above cover and the following commentary:

"Letter originated from Fleunier *sic* (21 Dec. dateline) via Calcutta, part i;§ - FEB 1856; transit mark in red, boxed INDIA PAID in red. Strip of four 1854 India 4 annas tied by concentric octagon B/1 in black. On reverse, Hong Kong medium broken ring (type 9) 30 MR 1856 transit and Canton 31 MR 1856 arrival....."

".....The 4 annas stamps are from the 4th printing (narrow spacing between stamps) and Head die III, Frame die II."

"Rate: This is an overfranked letter as the manuscript mark 1 indicates 1 shilling which was equivalent to 8 annas."

"Route: The letter presumably went *via Calcutta* per manuscript and the concentric octagonal B/1 was used by the Bengal Circle (Calcutta) even though the red India dispatch is unclear."

"It would appear that the letter was carried by a steamer rather than private ship because (i) The indication on top left "First steamer" (ii) The higher rate. It is unlikely that the letter was carried by the Calcutta/China line as Kirk II (p.164) quoted a Hong Kong arrival date of 19 March. However, *P&O Madras* left Galle (Ceylon) on 12 March via Penang 20 March, Singapore 22-23 March and arrived at Hong Kong on 30 March which ties with the Hong Kong c.d.s. Did the ship make a stop at Calcutta to pick up the mail?"

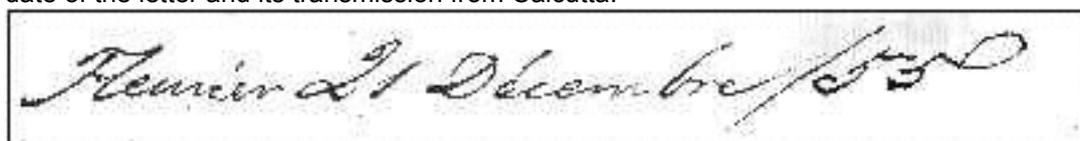
"Marking: The red boxed two-line INDIA PAID mark was usually struck at Bombay. Calcutta used an oblong shape INDIA PAID in one line. Was the former mark also supplied to Calcutta?"

"It appears that the "via Calcutta" seems to be in a different script and ink than the rest."

"There are only a few India covers franked 1854, 4 annas to China recorded."

The letter attracted a lot of interest among collectors and we have decided to reserach further into the postal history of the letter.

This 1855 cover discussed by Mr. Francis Au and illustrated in the Nov. 2007 HKPS newsletter is docketed as having originated in Fleurier, 21 Dec 1855. Fleurier is a municipality in the district of Val-de-Travers in the **canton of Neuchatel in Switzerland** <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fleurier>. This is the earliest cover seen from Switzerland to China. This origination is the reason for what appeared to be a two-month delay between the date of the letter and its transmission from Calcutta.



The lack of any Swiss or French markings on the cover indicates that it was carried outside the mail from Switzerland to India. The writer noted that the letter would be sent by the monthly mail of the 28th via Calcutta, so there could be a chance of forwarding it to China before the arrival of the direct mail of January 10th. The "mail of the 28th via Calcutta" actually referred to the mail for Bombay, whereas the 10.1.56 mail was that sent via Galle, Ceylon, to China.

The 2-line "India Paid" indicates that this letter entered the mails somewhere in India other than at the Bombay or Calcutta GPOs (per Giles p. 55). The four 4 anna Indian stamps would have been applied by an agent (albeit not an official agent, since there is no FAC) at the point at which the letter entered the mails. The letter was docketed "via Calcutta", and probably went overland from Bombay to Calcutta. Upon arrival at Calcutta, the stamps were cancelled "B1". The reason they were not cancelled at the entry point of the cover into the mails is uncertain, but could have been for reasons similar to mail from Treaty Ports in China not having been cancelled until arrival in Hong Kong.

Although incomplete and indistinct, the red date-stamp appears to be "C(alcutta) / 4(?) / Feb." However, some mishandling apparently occurred, since this letter was not sent on the P&O Calcutta Line *Chusan*, which departed Calcutta on 24.2.56, and arrived at HK on 19.3. Instead it was sent on the P&O *Bentinck*, which left Calcutta c.26.2, and reached Galle c.1.3. She dropped the mail for China and Australia at Galle, then left that port on 2.3 on her way to Suez. As indicated in the original article, this letter was then carried by the P&O *Madras* from Ceylon, 12.3 to HK, 30.3.56. This was the next mail after the direct 10.1 mail that the sender was trying to better, which arrived at Hong Kong on 10.3.56. The entire itinerary of this cover is detailed below (from 3 books by Reg Kirk).

Steamer	Marseille	Malta	Egypt	Bombay	Calcutta	Galle	Hong Kong
Unknown	c.28.12.55	c.31.12	-	-	-	-	-
Alma	-	c.1.1	c.5.1	-	-	-	-
Singapore	-	-	7.1	23.1	-	-	-
Bentinck	-	-	-	-	c.26.2	c.1.3	-
Madras	-	-	-	-	-	12.3	30.3.56

The original article suggests that the letter was overpaid 8 annas. However, the additional 8 annas most likely paid for the leg of the route from wherever this letter entered the mail in India to Calcutta. The 1 mark on the cover probably indicated the 1/- per half ounce rate for transport of this letter by P&O packet from India to HK, thus accounting for the other 8 annas.

It has also been suggested that the 1 could have been a 1 anna local rate paid for transport of the letter to Calcutta. However, this suggestion seems unlikely, since prepayment in stamps was required from the origination in India to the port of despatch, at least from 10.54 to 3.56 (per Martin & Blair, pg. 72), which would have left seven annas unaccounted for. Interestingly, by the time this letter actually left India, the 1/- per half ounce packet rate, effective since 5.46 (per Giles pg. 110), had been reduced to 4d per half ounce.

Another interesting feature of this letter, besides its Swiss origin and long delay, is the "Canton" arrival back-stamp. Col. Webb noted that this type 2 c.d.s. was applied on both arrival and dispatch, and that "many unpaid covers are found with this hand-stamp." However, in more recent experience, the type 2 c.d.s. occurs most often on covers in conjunction with the type 1 "Canton Paid," and has very seldom been seen on unpaid covers either inward or outward.

We would appreciate further comments from other experts, please email us



Acknowledgement: We would like to thank the owner of the cover for providing additional information regarding the cover